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How is the Australian tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment quality framework perceived elsewhere? A Taiwanese case study

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ABSTRACT

External evaluations of curriculum and assessment design have received increasing attention in higher education. However, cross-border evaluations of programs have not yet caught up with the more significant push toward the internationalisation of global partnerships. Addressing this knowledge gap, the motivation of this study is to explore how the Australian tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment framework is perceived in Taiwan. However, few institutions in Taiwan have embarked on this due to two main factors – lack of nationwide compliance and the perceived high-power distance that exists between academic staff of various ranks (e.g. professor vs. assistant professor). These outcomes contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the contextual differences that need to be addressed before adopting cross-national forms of external referencing involving curriculum and assessments. Insights from three focus groups and seven in-depth interviews with Taiwanese academics offer some strategies to introduce effective external evaluation outcomes.

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Introduction

External benchmarking is one method within an organisation's continuous improvement and quality assurance processes (Tasopoulou & Tsiotras, 2017). With the ongoing growth in the internationalisation of higher education, such as through transnational partnerships, questions may arise as to which is the most appropriate or best way to benchmark to use as a point of reference. Further, as institutions sign up to exchange partners, research collaborations, and other forms of alliances, greater scrutiny is required of their collaborations and offerings (Ayoun et al., 2010; Kozak & Kozak, 2016; Lagiewski et al.,

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2019). These trends have precipitated the emphasis on a holistic approach to higher education, driving institutions to devise a range of strategies to demonstrate their quality indicators, but also an opportunity to learn from quality frameworks (Camilleri, 2021; Horng et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2016; Y. A. Liu et al., 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2020). However, this may become even more complex in a COVID-impacted world due to the more significant heterogeneity of student cohorts and delivery modes (Tiwari et al., 2021).

The research presented here is motivated by conducting external evaluations in light of the tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment design principles in a case study of Taiwan. This addresses a knowledge gap where little is known about what practices exist or what educator perceptions are related to cross-border external evaluations of tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment design. This paper seeks to address such gaps in knowledge by adapting the Australian tourism and hospitality threshold learning outcomes (hereafter abbreviated as THE-TLO) project and exploring cross-border (Taiwan) educators' receptivity to voluntarily adopt such a quality framework. The intent of comparing Australia with Taiwan and the tourism and hospitality higher education standards is because of the maturity of the discipline in both countries, the similarity between their national population levels, and hence the appropriateness to focus on quality assurances between national contexts. Thus, the research question is,

What are international educators' perceptions of the Australian THE-TLO as a framework for external evaluations of tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment design?

To explore this question, this research explores Taiwanese academics' perceptions through focus groups and interviews to identify educators' receptivity to the use of external reference points in their teaching practice. This informs the development of a novel framework to guide future benchmarking efforts (Figure 2). It must be noted that this research occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic and that some of the extenuating circumstances may have changed since then, which will warrant future investigations.

Literature review

Following is a review of the literature that primarily informed the research questions and design. Themes covered in the tourism and hospitality context include curricula design, assessment design, and course benchmarking. This is followed by an introduction to the case in question, the Australian tourism and hospitality threshold learning outcomes (THE-TLO), and Taiwan's tertiary tourism and hospitality education sector.

Curriculum design in tourism and hospitality

Curricula comprise the intended learning outcomes that are scaffolded across programs and assessment structures in preparation for work readiness (Millar et al., 2010). Then, using both formative and summative assessments, institutions have at their disposal a range of tools to evaluate student performance across students' tertiary education trajectories (Ruge et al., 2019). As such, curriculum and assessment design are integral components of any curriculum that are fit for purpose (Fidgeon, 2010). For this reason, curriculum and assessment design should be conducted iteratively and are continuously reviewed over time (Bird et al., 2015; C. H. Hsu, 2018).

Curriculum design in tourism and hospitality is often undertaken amidst a specific socioecological and political-legal context with various external and internal factors for any institution. Examples of the external factors may be related to accreditation of programs, including the *Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)*, tourism-specific accreditations, for instance, *UNWTO TedQual* or *The-ICE* (Airey et al., 2015; Crotts et al., 2022) as well as the *Accreditation Commission for Programs in Hospitality Administration (ACPHA)* (C. Liu & Schänzel, 2019; Widarsyah et al., 2017).

Other external considerations related to curriculum design are targeted at industry-specific needs embedded in the context of a destination. For instance, Cueto (2016) reported on the inputs from flight attendants regarding the tourism curriculum in the Philippines. This mode of gaining industry validation is a common practice in disciplines such as tourism, as it represents authentic and contemporary insights from industry practitioners (Xu et al., 2022). This presents contemporary workforce expectations reflected in tourism and hospitality curriculum design principles to prepare students for future careers. With the recent external influence, or shock, of the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement of staff and students across borders was restricted, and there was a seismic shift in delivery modes as the world shifted to online delivery (Tham et al., 2022; Tiwari et al., 2021).

In contrast, internal influences on curriculum design are shaped by the institution's espoused vision and mission and how it seeks to differentiate itself as a higher education provider to its target audience (Gray et al., 2017). Collectively, these efforts are often cues as institutions morph to become more international, and therefore, curriculum design principles in tourism and hospitality amplify one's mechanism to what Mayo and Thomas-Haysbert (2008) termed evidence of *Assurance of Learning (AoL)*. In brief, AoL is a continuous quality improvement process that seeks to enhance the learning outcomes and experiences of staff and students involved in various courses within an entire program (Marshall, 2007). In the AACSB context of business schools, for example, AoL has a critical stage called "Closing the loop" (Reich et al., 2019), which provides tangible and actionable steps to support the quality assurance processes to improve the course outcomes for future student cohorts (Betters-Reed et al., 2008). These overarching considerations are also manifested in the design of assessment tasks.

Assessment design in tourism and hospitality

Assessment design is also an intricate part of curriculum development principles in tourism and hospitality. After all, the manifestation of any tourism or hospitality-related program is to produce student cohorts that possess the necessary competencies for various careers, that is, to be job-ready, especially for post-COVID environments (Steriopoulos et al., 2022). While assessment design principles enjoy a strong presence across many higher education fields, there remains little published on tourism and hospitality assessment design in academic literature (Steriopoulos et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2019). This may be attributed to the in-silo phenomena, where course coordinators select assessment tasks intuitively based on the contents and cohorts, and these are then internally reviewed and approved for use by their respective supervisors. Therefore, only some others outside the scope of the course are likely to gain any purview of what has been designed or developed, until adverse student feedback calls for an overhaul of the

assessments (Brinkman-Staneva & Barry O'Mahoney, 2015). Hence, it is evident that assessment design is rarely benchmarked elsewhere externally outside one's institution. However, emerging research has demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than being all bad, has opened up new opportunities for benchmarking from which future educators and administrators may learn, as well as innovative assessment design processes to support the development of job-ready graduates (Kelly et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). This comes on the back of ongoing developments where vocational education standards are being initiated for countries across the Asia Pacific region, which enhances the transferability of skillsets catering to the global mobility of cross-border workers, such as in the tourism and hospitality sector (UNESCO, 2017).

Benchmarking in tourism and hospitality higher education

Put simply, a benchmark is a standard by which performance can be measured (Hinton et al., 2000). Its origins are in the industrial manufacturing sector, where organisations can evaluate production outputs and other service measurements against past performance or competitors (Ahmed & Rafiq, 1998). Applied to tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment design, benchmarking often entails evaluations of an institution against some of the best practices that exist elsewhere (Tham et al., 2022). Whilst desirable, it must be noted that one barrier to such benchmarking, may be the rivalry amongst competitors, which has only magnified with the COVID-shift across the world to online delivery to compete in a brand and product proliferated market (Schweinsberg et al., 2022).

In the limited extant literature at the time of this case study, benchmarking was undertaken using secondary data and outlines related to tourism and hospitality programs. Szende et al. (2019) evaluated 21 US institutions for their tourism and hospitality programs and found that there has been an increased focus on industry relevance and nuanced skills, such as service design and sustainability. Taking a more global orientation, Leung et al. (2018) investigated 620 hospitality courses in three English-speaking countries, the US, the UK, and Australia, and found similar outcomes in terms of industry skills and topic expertise. However, the authors noted the greater emphasis on cross-cultural awareness and training to equip students for the internationalisation of the sector and tourism trends. What is important to note is that such forms of benchmarking are based on stated contents related to program courses and outlines often presented as static documents. Both these Western-centric studies allude to the need to obtain qualitative and quantitative data emanating from educators' voices, given that these individuals are agents of delivering the curricula to students, industry, and institutional governance bodies. In this space, this research seeks to uncover academic perceptions of international benchmarking of curriculum and assessment design principles by leveraging another country's national tourism threshold learning outcomes benchmarking project.

The tourism and hospitality threshold learning outcomes project

The Australian Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project began in response to the Australian Government's report *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (DEEWR, 2009), where academic standards were defined as, "Academic standards are learning outcomes described in terms of discipline-specific knowledge, skills, and

capabilities expressed as threshold learning outcomes that a graduate of any given discipline (or program) must have achieved” (Ewan, 2010, p. 3)

For tourism and hospitality, the Tourism, Hospitality, and Events Threshold Learning Outcomes (THE-TLO) Project was born out of the Federal Government’s Office of Learning and Teaching grant awarded in 2015 (Whitelaw et al., 2015). In this project, Australian higher education providers were invited to participate in the development of threshold learning outcomes (TLO) about learning standards mapped towards the Australian Quality Framework (AQF) level 7 - Final year of a Bachelor degree, and AQF level 9 - Master degree qualifications (AQF Advisory Board, 2007; Gross et al., 2017) The second phase of the project entailed participants to select a particular assessment task from one course within the domains of either tourism, hospitality or events within the higher education framework and have it reviewed by at least one external academic from a different institution (CAUTHE, 2022).

One of the main drivers for launching this TLO project was to instil greater professionalisation of tourism and hospitality degrees. This is because, unlike other disciplines, such as nursing or engineering, that possess professionally accredited degrees, tourism and hospitality do not enjoy such a status. As such, the THE-TLO project presented a criterion-based curriculum and assessment level of performance to support an increasing number of higher education providers now providing tourism and hospitality-related degrees (Whitelaw et al., 2015). There is now a greater push across the Australian higher education landscape for all degree programs to initiate their external benchmarking processes by 2019, though this expectation has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The THE-TLO project is perhaps one of the first to feature several institutions formulating standards at a national level.

The Australian version of a quality assurance unit governing higher education is undertaken by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and covers programs administered by all tertiary education institutions in Australia, including universities, private education operators, and vocational schools. Such mechanisms of assurance of learning are not unique to Australia, with Taiwan also having a similar agency to manage higher education quality in the form of the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT). The HEEACT remit is also to evaluate the number of universities and their program offerings and take an active role in recommending the rationalisation of courses due to decreasing birth rates and hence lower enrolments into higher education over time (Y. Hsu, 2019). This backdrop, therefore, offers a timely opportunity to undertake this research and locate the application of the THE-TLO project as a tool to evaluate tourism and hospitality quality assurance in Taiwan.

In the first 18 months of the THE-TLO project, a consultative approach was undertaken to solicit from a wide range of academic, industry, and end-user inputs to formulate domains that could capture the essence of what the TLOs would encompass. These were synthesised into five domains – Collaboration, Interdisciplinary Inquiry, Problem Solving, Professional Responsibility, and Service & Experience Design (Whitelaw et al., 2015). Following the establishment of these five domains, around two dozen Australian higher education providers were grouped into dyads or triads based on their nominated tourism, leisure, and events course and assessment items. Two of the authors of this paper had the opportunity to participate in this project and have been involved since the project was in its inception.

The preliminary observations of this project are that it has the benefit of triangulating a range of perspectives around what constitutes agreeable standards for tourism and hospitality education. This is extremely valuable because the Australian higher education sector comprises a range of institutions that are quite distinct and subject to different legislation, ownership, and governance models (Howard, 2021). These include the sandstone Group of Eight universities that are the oldest and probably most endowed in terms of research reputation and rankings, Innovative Research Universities (IRU) that feature applied and cutting-edge developments, the Regional Universities Network, and other public and private institutions that operate in the vocational training space, such as the privately owned Le Cordon Bleu. Obtaining these different perceptions about what tourism and hospitality degrees should feature provided rich inputs towards the nomenclature for robust discussions emanating from those involved in the project. Bloxham et al. (2016) contended that such forms of external moderation can create communities of practice and have significant network effects compared to institutions working in silos. Having such external validation also increases the potential quality assurance processes in response to the demands of contemporary higher education environments (O'Connell et al., 2016).

However, the project was not without its challenges. Given that the project commenced after many programs and courses were already developed, it led to a type of "reverse engineering" of TLOs to existing contents. This produced much variance regarding where each participating institution approached, interpreted, and applied the standards. Along with the significant variation in the types, and scales of institutions across Australia, this is likely to already produce divergent views of how assessment pieces and curricula should be conceptualised and administered. For this reason, through a series of workshops, the THE-TLO project coached participants to better understand what the standards were meant to measure based on specific indicators and then reintroduced the assessment tasks again for calibration. This approach is supported by Booth et al. (2016), as their work found a significantly reduced variation of outcomes following the peer evaluation process. Nevertheless, given the collegiality of the participants, such peer evaluation projects have inherent merit to stakeholders of higher education (Sefcik et al., 2018). According to Goh and King (2020), the THE-TLO project has led to a baseline set of agreed markers and indicators to develop a suite of best practices and resources that have positioned Australia as a leading provider of tourism and hospitality education globally. Against this backdrop, the test of such threshold standards is whether it possesses external validity or in other words if it is equally applicable in other contexts (Freeman & Hancock, 2011).

Context of Taiwan tourism and hospitality degrees

According to Study in Taiwan (2023), there were 87 tourism and hospitality-related degrees offered across Taiwan. With its population almost equal to that of Australia, Taiwan has a much larger supply of these degrees because many of the training colleges had their statuses upgraded to that of a university following governmental policies in the 1990s to support the upskilling of the workforce (Chang & Hsu, 2010). However, the spike in higher education degree offerings instead created (un)intended consequences by diluting the quality of graduate attributes due to the ease with

which individuals could receive an undergraduate qualification (Chan & Lin, 2015). Since 2015, the dwindling birth rate prompted educational reforms to close some universities due to falling enrolment numbers (Hung, 2016). The consolidation of the higher education landscape in Taiwan provided an opportunity for Taiwanese universities to seize the initiative and demonstrate excellence in their respective degree offerings.

The focus on quality triggered Taiwanese institutions to embrace globalisation and the practical skills of the industry. Previously, both Horng (2003) and Chang and Hsu (2010) suggested that the development of tourism and hospitality education in Taiwan should emphasise greater cooperation between academia and industry, the flexibility and diversification of curriculum design, and the internationalisation of course contents to cultivate emerging talent ready for global needs and demands of the industry. This was seen in the past three decades when industry practitioners solicited opinions to help develop a robust curriculum for the tourism and hospitality higher education sector in Taiwan. In addition, overseas internship and exchange study programs were also integrated into the curriculum to provide a more global orientation (Cai et al., 2015; Cater et al., 2018). This reflected the work of Chen and Shen (2012), who obtained the students' responses at 20 universities in Taiwan and found that internship program planning and industry involvement profoundly influenced students' willingness to stay in the tourism and hospitality industries upon graduation.

However, much of the focus on the internationalisation effect on Taiwan's higher education landscape has mostly been driven from a research perspective which is, in part, by the growing worldwide influence of global university rankings (Howard, 2021; Oleksiyenko et al., 2021; Schweinsberg et al., 2022). Shreeve (2020) argued that, like many other Asian contexts, Taiwan has been fixated on its pursuit of global university rankings, where the metrics are heavily skewed toward research outcomes. As such, the dominant quality indicators are shaped by crude indicators such as citations and publications in preferred journals, such as those ranked on SSCI listings (Chou & Chan, 2017). However, there remain significant gaps in leveraging best practice curricula and teaching outcomes for tourism and hospitality education internationally. This research, therefore, is warranted to support how external referencing can assist as Taiwanese universities, like many others, seek to diversify their international student markets and position themselves as preferred higher education destinations with quality offerings (Moslehpour et al., 2020). One of the ways to extend such outcomes is through international evaluations of curriculum and assessment design, which led to the inception of this research.

Research questions and theoretical framework

The THE-TLO project has been adapted across Australia and features a range of higher education providers. However, very little exists as to whether such a framework can be repurposed elsewhere and if educators are as receptive to such developments in their higher education landscape. Given the gaps in knowledge, the overarching research question is:

What are international educators' perceptions of the Australian THE-TLO as a framework for external evaluations of tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment design?

Providing insights into the research question can examine if cultural or contextual differences need to be negotiated to realise external evaluations and their desired outcomes. To address the overarching research question, the peer review framework proposed by Booth et al. (2016) is adopted to elucidate insights related to four core dimensions relevant to this project – Sector, Discipline, Individual, and Higher Education Institution. To the best of our knowledge, little is known as to best practices or barriers to the context for external evaluations in a cross-border context, especially in a tourism or hospitality higher education environment within Asia. As alluded to by Oktadiana and Chon (2017), the increasing focus on quality assurance within tourism and hospitality education in Asia suggests that external evaluations can no longer be ignored, which lends the justification for this research.

Method and sample

Given the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative case study is recommended to be used where researchers seek to understand or explore a phenomenon within its unique context, such as the socioecological and politico-legal environments (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Dickson & Darcy, 2021). See also Figure 1.

Typically, multiple data collection methods are used across three sub-cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this research, a Taiwan case study is employed, following the case study approach proposed by Yin (2018) where the research design comprises three Taiwanese institutions as sub-cases. This fits within a constructivist epistemology, where “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices,

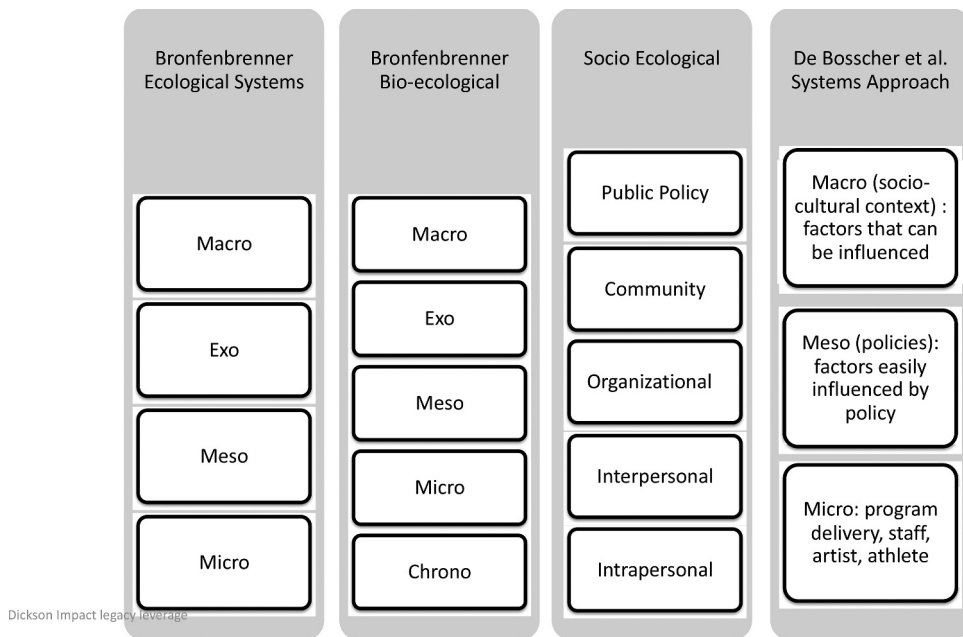


Figure 1. Key representations of socioecological frameworks (Dickson and Darcy (2021)).

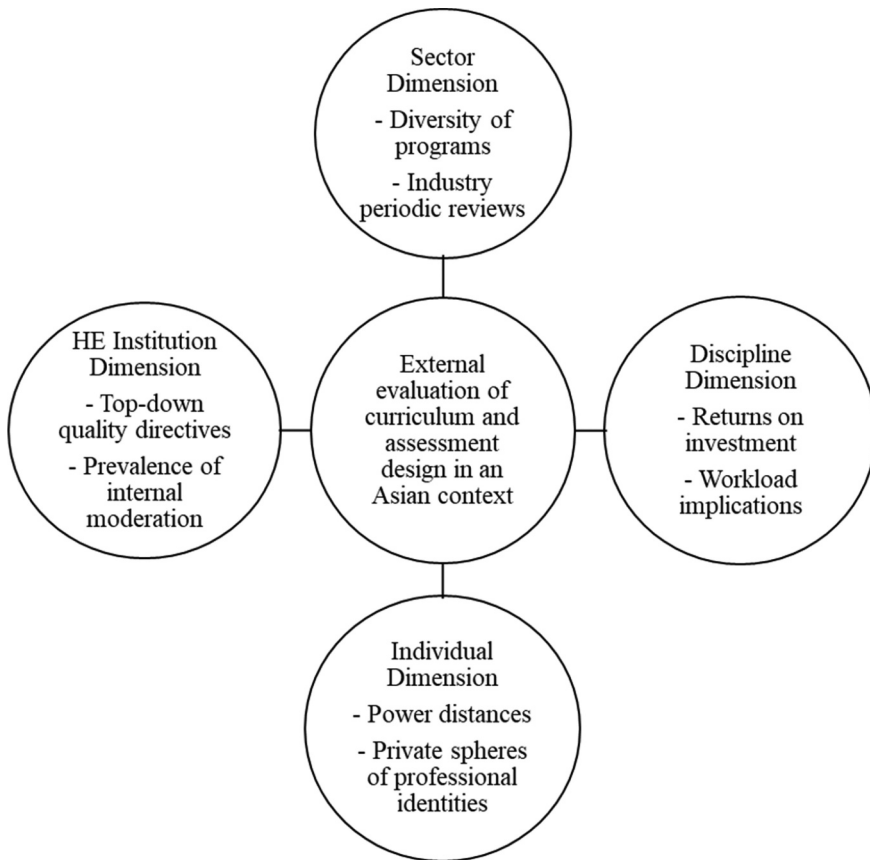


Figure 2. Considerations towards external evaluations of curriculum and assessment design in an Asian context.

being constructed in and out of the interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

The screening criteria for the sample were as follows – Institutions that offered English-taught tourism/hospitality/leisure programs in Taiwan formed the initial shortlist. From the Taiwanese database of higher education providers, three institutions with English-taught tourism degrees were selected to be part of this exploratory stage to investigate academics’ perceptions of the TLO standards to be applied in a Taiwanese context. These three institutions were chosen as they offered tourism and hospitality undergraduate programs entirely in English, with one other institution’s English-taught tourism degree program officially recognised by Taiwan’s Ministry of Education excluded due to the time and resource constraints in getting to that university. Likewise, another university in central Taiwan was excluded as they only offered English-taught postgraduate degrees in tourism and hospitality. Within the sub-cases employed for this research, one institution was based in the capital city of Taipei, while the other two were in the second largest city, Kaohsiung. Nevertheless, [Table 1](#) shows the different sessions undertaken over three weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic. Each institution was assigned an acronym to

Table 1. Focus group and interviews conducted face-to-face in Taiwan.

Institutions	Format	Number of participants
Taipei private university (TPU)	Focus group of 1.5 hours	10
Kaohsiung private university (KPR)	Semi-structured interviews of 45 minutes each	3
Kaohsiung public university (KPU)	Semi-structured interviews of 45 minutes each	5

anonymise its identities. A subsequent screening criterion was employed to select only those faculty members who oversaw courses. This criterion ensured that individuals who had full control and responsibility for curriculum and assessment materials could directly explicate the research questions of interest. Participants in the interviews or focus groups were those who were interested and available to meet with one of the research team during on-campus visits to the respective institutions. A sample of the interview or focus group questions is presented in [Appendix 1](#), where the questions were derived from a range of relevant literature (see, for instance, Bloxham et al., 2016; Sefcik et al., 2018).

For this research, in the sub-cases, focus groups and interviews were chosen as methods of choice. Qualitative methods seek to uncover meanings associated with the lesser-known phenomenon, and the use of focus groups and interviews in this instance allows the researchers to further probe *why* and *how* international threshold learning outcomes were interpreted and, more importantly, participants' attitudes and perceptions towards their application in a local context. Similarly, these qualitative methods have been employed elsewhere, such as in accounting threshold learning standards (Watty et al., 2014). In addition, the option of whether focus groups or interviews were to be utilised was made in consultation with the respective Deans or Faculty Heads, cognisant of the time and resources available to accommodate as many academics as possible. In summary, [Table 1](#) illustrates the focus groups and interviews conducted face-to-face in Taiwan over two weeks.

Ethical consent was sought and granted via one of the authors' institutions, approval reference A/17/938. Approval details were entered onto the Research Project Information Sheet, distributed with each interview/focus group participant and their consent forms. Each participant then gave consent to their participation in the project, and they were also informed that this was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Data were collected until theoretical saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2017). This occurs when no new themes have emerged (Guest et al., 2017). Based on the focus group and seven interviews conducted, it was ascertained that such insights provided sufficient depth to present answers to the research question. The overview of participants involved in this project is presented in [Table 2](#).

Following the effective practices of recording, transcribing, and analysis of interviews and focus groups as prescribed by other scholars (see for instance (Basit, 2003; Parameswaran et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2014), participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their participation would be audio recorded for transcription purposes. Following this, transcription notes were provided back to the participants as an audit trail to check for the completeness and accuracy of the contents. Approved and finalised versions of these transcriptions were then analysed using NVivo (Sotiriadou et al., 2014) as a tool to support the coding of themes into macro, meso, and micro topics that reflect the socioecological context ([Figure 1](#)) which will be subsequently discussed.

Table 2. Overview of participants.

Institutions	Participant profile	Gender	Years of teaching	Expertise
TPU	Dean of School (M1)	Male	22	Tourism operations management
	Head of Department (F1)	Female	10	Sustainable tourism
	Associate Professor (M2)	Male	13	Tourism marketing and branding
	Associate Professor (M3)	Male	8	Tourism consumer behaviour
	Associate Professor (M4)	Male	16	Tourism and retail management
	Associate Professor (M5)	Male	22	Leisure management
	Assistant Professor (F2)	Female	2	Tourism management
	Assistant Professor (M6)	Male	6	Hospitality management
	Head of School (F3)	Female	20	Tourism resource management
	Associate Professor (M7)	Male	12	Tourism and cultural planning
KPR	Head of Department (F3)	Female	11	Smart tourism and hospitality
	Assistant Professor (M8)	Male	3	Sports tourism
KPU	Assistant Professor (F4)	Female	9	Hotel service quality
	Dean of International College (F5)	Female	14	Communication and linguistics, special interest tourism
	Assistant Professor (M9)	Male	15	Business events
	Professor (M10)	Male	12	Cross-cultural communication
	Associate Professor (M11)	Male	7	IT and tourism
	Professor (M12)	Male	19	Electronic commerce

*M indicates male participant, *F indicates female participant.

Findings and discussion

Higher education institution dimension

Each of the three Taiwanese universities involved in this project featured curriculum structures, and hours were primarily governed by institutional norms in consultation with relevant authorities. An often-employed strategy for curriculum and assessment external evaluations largely took the form of industry inputs, where some distinguished members of key sectors (e.g., airline, cruise) were appointed to the advisory board, thereby providing inputs to enhance the existing curriculum. This view is best supported by participant M12:

We have a distinguished airline director on our program advisory panel, so they tell us if our curriculum reflects the current skills required by the sector. If there are gaps, my teaching team and I will revise the curriculum based on their input . . . However, this is usually done once every four to five years and not on an annual basis.

Furthermore, participant F1 revealed that the industry representative is often an alumnus of the institution, so he or she would have a reasonably good grasp of the curriculum from the alma mater. Added F1: *“Knowing the identity of the industry representative helps to solicit constructive feedback given their intimate knowledge of the course, where they had graduated from.”*

While this may be an efficient manner to obtain industry inputs to enhance the quality of a program, there are two inherent deficiencies of this approach. One, the industry partner may exhibit a groupthink mentality due to the prior relations existing between the individual and the institution (Riccobono et al., 2016). Two, industry inputs from a domestic perspective do not necessarily translate to benchmarking the curriculum on a global stage (Luyben et al., 2017). As such, the initiative taken in this research to involve third-party, independent academic calibrations of curriculum and assessment design

provides another lens to triangulate the quality of tourism and hospitality education at a global level.

The higher educational institution dimension offers valuable insights into the unique manifestations of cross-border contexts in action. In other contexts, higher education standards appear to be directly transplanted elsewhere, especially from Global North to South orientations (Tight, 2022). Yet, the three Taiwanese institutions in this research approach external referencing instead at arm's length, valuing internal, industry, and alumni inputs as tools for quality enhancement. There is not yet a requirement at the national level for institutions to seek external referencing partners elsewhere, even though the world rankings of several Taiwanese institutions have dropped off in recent years (A. Y. C. Hou et al., 2022).

Sector dimension

The role of higher education providers in Taiwan primarily reflects the diverse nature of its tourism and hospitality sector (Han et al., 2015). In particular, the ubiquitous presence of these institutions across the country's landscape is an attempt to utilise higher education as a means of upward social mobility and to generate a diverse pool of skilled labour in preparation for the industries of tomorrow (Mok & Neubauer, 2016). As such, public and private universities have different majors at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, covering programs such as tourism, leisure, hospitality, culinary arts, events management, aviation, and cruise management, among others.

The diversity of such programs, about the objectives of benchmarking within this research, could present some inherent challenges, as M10 opined: *"While we have programs in tourism or leisure, there are distinct differences as to how each institution offers its curriculum, which could make external evaluations challenging."* Whilst this was also acknowledged by M9, he nevertheless felt that it was the principles of external evaluations that would be very useful in calibrating one's curriculum and assessment design that does not appear to have any precedence in Taiwan: *"I know that from experience we have very varied curriculum types in the country. But being able for a third party to validate my curriculum and assessments from an academic perspective will provide a significant quality indicator to me. For instance, THE-ICE auditors came in and provided further feedback on my assessment and curriculum items, and shared how others elsewhere are teaching it . . ."* M9's view was likewise echoed by F3, who highlighted that as a new academic with less than two years of experience in the country, having some form of external evaluation on curriculum and assessment design does foster greater confidence in her abilities: *"I don't know many people outside the organisation, and while KPU has an industry advisory board, allowing international academics whom I can discuss curriculum and assessments offer a means of triangulation. And I have also received written feedback from THE-ICE on what possible areas I can make to enhance my course curriculum and assessments, which is helpful."*

It is interesting to note F3's use of the term triangulation, which is often associated with engineering processes of having different points of independent assessment to arrive at an outcome, and in turn, increases the study's reliability (Hussein, 2009). The concept has since been applied in other disciplines, such as tourism (see Koc & Boz, 2014) and related to this research, curriculum, and assessment design benchmarking (Edejer & Kennedy,

2018; Park et al., 2016). All the same, there appears to be a broad agreement in the sector that enhancing curriculum and assessment design principles and practices will serve as points of differentiation of an institution's educational quality and respond to other accreditation requirements and governmental demands.

Critically, the findings are juxtaposed to industry and employment in the respective countries, Australia, and Taiwan. While there is a strong vocational angle to tourism and hospitality, there is a clear point of difference in that the English-taught programs offer Taiwanese students wider mobility options of the opportunity to work elsewhere and attain better standards of living (W. Liu et al., 2022). This might be a trigger for higher education institutions to consider ways to incorporate periodic external referencing initiatives to prepare students for global careers, especially considering the COVID-19-induced changes to the future of work.

Discipline dimension

The discipline dimension, in this context, relates to the peer evaluation processes undertaken for tourism and hospitality education. While this has been evident in tertiary providers in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, disciplinary evaluations from a national or international perspective remain a novelty in many Asian contexts. This was somewhat surprising, given that vocational and tertiary offerings of tourism and hospitality programs have existed for almost three decades.

Yet, some insights as to what the perceived challenges or constraints were highlighted by participants. For instance, M2 from TPU mentioned that at present, there appeared to be almost no requirement from Taiwan's Ministry of Education to undertake such external evaluations, and as such participation is largely a decision left to individual discretion. M2's view was also common in some others who had participated in this research, as it also would require time and resourcing to undertake, as M5 commented: *"We already have such a busy teaching workload across 18 weeks of a semester. Adding something like this to our plate will complicate things, especially when we need to perhaps spend time with academics from other countries who are also busy with their work ..."*

From a discipline dimension, external evaluations in Taiwan currently reside in a top-down approach where executive-level decisions or committees congregate once every few years to assess the overall program and determine its fit for purpose (Noda et al., 2018). Delving into the granular nature of curriculum or assessment calibration remains solely in the hands of program coordinators and usually their heads of school/discipline, and unless assessment or student feedback shows unusual trends, represent the *modus operandi* of curriculum and assessment design principles in locations within Taiwan.

In the extant literature, external evaluations of higher education curriculum and assessment design are argued to be meritorious to institutions, including at the discipline level (Bloxham et al., 2016; Booth et al., 2016; Healey, 2000). Yet, few scholars provide empirical data to substantiate the attitudes for/against, or the enablers/barriers to bringing desired results to fruition. This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding that some perceived barriers to undertaking external evaluation from a tourism and hospitality higher education setting are embedded in perceived returns on investment or workload considerations. After all, Sefcik et al. (2018) postulated that a conducive

environment is required to support and facilitate external evaluation for critical goals and partnerships to flourish. Therefore, a tokenistic approach to external evaluation is likely to fail, especially when there is little to suggest discipline buy-in across the national landscape.

Importantly, the findings reiterate the need to extrapolate curriculum and assessment design in a cross-country context as a cog in a large sociological ecosystem that involves other stakeholders such as governments, industry, and the wider society. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic has ramifications on how tourism and hospitality prompt a rethink of other skills such as empathy, digital technologies, and collaboration in-person or across virtual teams. There are also new business models such as cloud kitchens and other innovative start-ups that will need to be examined across borders for best practices and co-created benefits. National reforms to higher education occurring across the world, including Australia and Taiwan, are arguably the first step to considering discipline-related educational futures.

Individual dimension

A cultural factor associated with high power distance provides interesting insights to elucidate individual dimensions for external evaluation. M4 best articulated this perspective:

I was just an assistant professor and recently just got promoted to associate professor, whereas some others whom my course may be evaluated against are the founding professors in tourism or hospitality in Taiwan or the world ... Who am I to question them in their approach to curriculum or assessment design?

High power distance as manifested in the tourism and higher education landscape in Taiwan, was evident, as M11 also emphasised: *"Taiwan's tourism and hospitality academia is a very small circle, people are very well connected ... Some will choose people whom they have collaborated with in the past if they are to be externally evaluated, as arbitrary groupings can lead to less open discussions, for fear of ramifications ..."* When probed on this issue, M5 explained:

Each year, all grant applications go through a peer review process, like what this external evaluation seeks to achieve. However, key personnel on the grants panel have tourism or hospitality backgrounds and so are accustomed to viewing documents presented in a particular manner. Hence, any deviation from the norm can result in detrimental outcomes ...

The intertwined relations of tourism and hospitality education in Taiwan show the deleterious effects of high-power distance embedded within the academic fraternity. High power distance is one orientation of Hofstede's (1991) cross-cultural studies and is described as leaders holding extensive authority at the expense of others at a subordinate or lower level of the hierarchy. Taiwan, as with other Asian contexts, is characterised by environments featuring high power distance across organisational and personal spaces (Hsiung & Tsai, 2017). The high-power distance orientation has manifested in a climate of fear of speaking out, especially when one's sphere of influence in the higher education setting of Taiwan can be easily scrutinised and altered.

This cultural element has almost been overlooked in extant literature when most studies have been situated in contexts of low power distance, such as Australia and the United States. However, when applied to an Asian or oriental context, high power distance can be an invisible barrier to implementing external evaluations due to the perceived unequal balance of power concerning knowledge dissemination. This is significantly different from the Australian THE-TLO project, where team members were open to discussing ideas and frameworks without trepidation or fear of backlash. However, for such similar projects to get underway in an Asian context, there is a need to clarify the processes and principles of external evaluation to avoid the situation where project members (un)intentionally hold back information or, worse still, accept others' viewpoints unilaterally and succumb to persons of higher academic ranks.

The second individual dimension identified by several participants is the notion of the classroom (and its related activities such as curriculum and assessment design) as the private sphere of an academic. For this reason, while external evaluation was perceived to be significant to all participants, several conceded that asking academics to offer a glimpse of their private sphere to be evaluated by others outside the organisation can be challenging. For instance, F3 stated that:

Some of these academics have just started their teaching careers and are beginning to build their track record in very early stages, so to ask them to open up their curriculum and assessment to unknown others can be somewhat intimidating because they could be knocked back for lacking experience . . .

On the other end of the spectrum are also highly experienced educators with numerous years of teaching and industry experience, so bringing them into the external evaluation project could be perceived as questioning their capability, as F1 relates:

My staff have extensive teaching and industry experience. I have been working with them over long periods . . . I trust that what they do works for the courses they teach . . . Asking them to open their books for others to inspect can appear to erode that trust in them.

This notion of the private space of academia is not limited to curriculum and assessment benchmarking but has been alluded to in other relevant areas of higher education, such as research supervision, academic workloads, and student performance (Evison et al., 2021; Macfarlane, 2015; Manathunga, 2005). Private spaces are also emblematic of tourism and hospitality, especially in the case of chefs who often have the kitchen as their proprietary, with only the front-stage dining experience visible to customers and other staff, and the back-stage of the kitchen a veil for their emotional labour (Demetry, 2013; Dickson & Huyton, 2008).

Collectively, the findings augment the role of individual dimensions as essential considerations to enable peer evaluation of tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment to materialise. These outcomes reiterate the need to contextualise external evaluation principles and practices, especially in Asia-Pacific. The interviews illuminate unwritten and often liminal spaces that go beyond the physical landscape of people and classroom environments. Cultural cues and awareness of Confucian beliefs and symbolism devoted to the teaching profession are to be juxtaposed when enacting external peer evaluation procedures, as illuminated in the case of Taiwan (Chan & Yang, 2017).

The individual considerations illuminated in the discussion above highlight the diversity of higher education tourism education providers and the composition of the faculty. At a cursory level, several of the Taiwanese faculty members revealed that they had entered academia on the back of years of industry experience and continue to attract teaching instructors from industry in specialised areas such as airline management or culinary tourism. Such practices are perhaps less common in Australia, where most academics have earned their ticket by first completing a PhD in a relevant field. This point of difference arguably explains why specific high-power distances occur in countries like Taiwan, concerning the knowledge, skills, and abilities earned through years of experience. For this reason, conducting external referencing in specialised topics becomes challenging because of the uniquely acquired competencies in the diversity of higher education tourism and hospitality providers elsewhere.

Practical contributions

There appears to be overall receptivity towards the international application of the Australian TLO standards to the Taiwanese academic fraternity. However, operationalising these findings leads to a refinement of the work of Booth et al. (2016) in terms of the nomenclature and contextual cues related to the external evaluation of curriculum and assessment design. Figure 2 depicts the outcomes of the findings that offer a practical framework with the dimension to be addressed when seeking to replicate threshold learning frameworks internationally. By elucidating key facets within each of the four dimensions, the research advances the knowledge and practice of internationalising external evaluations of curriculum and assessment design in an Asia-Pacific context, of which little is known (Y. Hou, 2020).

Potentially, a way forward in steering international external referencing of threshold learning standards could be via regular dialogues among universities across the Asia-Pacific region, whereby relevant disciplines could brainstorm, identify key criteria, and establish baseline indicators for their respective institutions. This encapsulates both criterion-based approaches as well as contextual variations that could lead to a convergent set of measures akin to a threshold learning index, thereby offering points of reference for quality assurance outcomes, which are already in practice within a range of disciplines (Avolio & Benzaquen, 2020; Kundu & Majumdar, 2020).

Conclusion, limitations, and future studies

In conclusion, the research explored the perceptions of Taiwanese educators as to the concept of external evaluations of curriculum and assessment design principles in a tourism and hospitality program context. The justification for undertaking such a project was triggered by the lack of studies in an Asian setting related to tourism and hospitality higher education curriculum and assessment benchmarking practices. As extant literature has focused mainly on mature tertiary sectors such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, very little exists regarding how such practices are perceived from emerging Asian perspectives.

The findings reveal unique points of difference related to the cultural setting of higher education in the Taiwan tourism and hospitality fraternity. Much of the moderation process has been internal, with the occasional industry periodic input, though these are largely from individuals who are acquainted with the curriculum as alumni of the institutions. Rather, the discipline and individual dimensions appeared to be the biggest hurdles that could derail any potential external evaluation projects. This can be attributed to the perceived lack of returns, increased workloads, and encroaching on high power distance structures and private spheres that are culturally and contextually specific. Nevertheless, calls for greater internationalisation and comparisons are made from Asian governments seeking to lift their higher education quality standards; such threshold learning external referencing mechanisms will provide a targeted and systematic approach to operationalize discipline-related measures whilst recognising the contextual nuances and idiosyncrasies that are unique to each country's tertiary landscape. Nevertheless, the value and contribution of this study are reflected in unpacking the societal, institutional, and cultural norms that serve as moderators of external referencing successes in the area of curriculum design in tourism and hospitality higher education globally. This comes amidst greater calls for collaboration and knowledge sharing among providers since the onset of COVID-19, which has radically redefined the way tourism and hospitality are taught and the impacts it has on other stakeholders (Stefanini et al., 2021; Tiwari et al., 2021)

This research is not without its limitations. As an exploratory study, a bigger pool of data will be needed to empirically validate the constructs and variables in the framework. In addition, the views of the participants are solicited from three institutions, which may not necessarily be generalisable across other Taiwanese institutions. Further, Asian institutions in other countries may reveal similar or different perceptions than those in Taiwan. These limitations notwithstanding, the research has documented avenues for future studies.

Future studies could investigate if and whether external evaluations of vocational or less vocational institutions present similar or different outcomes about desired curriculum and assessment design outcomes. Another stream of research could undertake longitudinal studies to compare before and after calibration processes and impacts on staff or student satisfaction with the course or program, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, other scholars may also wish to consider the suitability of alternative external evaluation frameworks, such as those in Europe (see Feeney & Hogan, 2017), and their relevance to the Asian context. In totality, this research elucidates further insights into the external evaluation process and how this is perceived from a Taiwanese tourism and hospitality perspective and will offer a useful point of departure for subsequent studies in a fast-evolving and globalised landscape of higher education.

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Appendix 1: Sample interview and focus group questions

- Q1. Can you share a little about the length of time you have coordinated this course and also the profile of the student cohort, please?
- Q2. Why have you chosen the curriculum and assesment tasks for the course you are coordinatating
- Q3. How much discretion do you have in team of altering the timing and format of curriculum and assesments?
- Q4. Do you consider the current state of curriculum and assesment tasks a good gauge of student'ssummative learning outcome ? Please elaborate
- Q5. To what extent do you see the fit of your curriculum and assesment tasks in meeting course learning objectives program intention and the tourism and hospitality threshold standards?
- Q6. What are the enablers and barriers associated with mapping the current state of your curriculum and assesment tasks in your course to TLO fram ework?
- Q7. Are you receptive to other curriculum and assesment design consideration for your course
- Q8. In what ways do you see yourself contributing as an external Evaluator toward such international projects?
- Q9. Where do you theis project assisting you in the development of your future curriculum and assesment design needs?
- Q10. Are there best practice of curriculum and assesment design that you are working toward? Please highlight some of these considerations.

Response to reviewers' comments

Reviewer 1	Response(s)
This paper did not explain clearly the motivations of study. Please identify the research niche of this study.	The motivation of the study is now explicitly mentioned in the abstract, as well as in the first sentence of the second paragraph in the introduction.
References in Literature Review that published in nearly three years are limited. Please add some more related references that published within nearly three years.	Two further articles are added to the introductory paragraph to show related references in areas of quality measurement. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not much else was in the area of tourism education and external referencing within the last three years.
Please indicate the screening criteria of selecting interviewees of focus group and interviews as well as how the numbers of interviewees are decided.	The screening criteria for selecting interviewees or focus group participants have been added to pages 14 and 15.
Please add the basic background of interviewees of focus group and interviews such as gender, years of teaching and expertise.	These requested details have been added to Table 1 . Collectively, their profiles show a wide range of expertise and experience to reflect on the application of external referencing standards in Taiwan.
Please clarify the value and contribution of this study to the field of curriculum design of higher education in Tourism and Hospitality.	In the conclusion section, the value and contribution are clarified as follows: <i>Nevertheless, the value and contribution of this study is reflected in unpacking the societal, institutional, and cultural norms that serve as moderators of external referencing successes in curriculum design in tourism and hospitality higher education globally. This comes amidst greater calls for collaboration and knowledge sharing among providers since the onset of COVID-19, which has radically redefined the way tourism and hospitality is taught and the impacts it has to other stakeholders (Stefanini et al., 2021; Tiwari et al., 2021).</i>

(Continued)

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Reviewer 2	Response(s)
<p>As stated at the outset, this research addresses the question of "... international educators' perceptions of the Australian THE-TLO as a framework for external evaluations of tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment design", while the title of the research is somehow indicative of academics' perceptions of the useability or usefulness of an "external" curriculum/assessment framework across cultural or international borders. In a way the research seems to focus on perceptions of external evaluation where little appears to be available for evaluation as the alluded framework is yet to be implemented in the case study region.</p>	<p>Thank you for this comment. The title of the paper has since been changed to: How is the Australian tourism and hospitality curriculum and assessment quality framework perceived elsewhere? A Taiwanese Case Study</p>
<p>Skimming through the interview questions in Appendix One, it appears only two questions are either explicit or implied of the evaluation framework (THE-TLO). For quality assurance or curriculum assessment in particular, what are the roles of other well received evaluation frameworks (or academics' perceptions of "other" such frameworks as UNWTO Tedqual or THE-ICE, to mention just a few? I wonder whether these "other" assessment frameworks have been incorporated in the interview protocol, or have been discussed or brought up in the informant interviews.</p>	<p>Yes indeed, participants have raised their awareness of other assessment and quality assurance frameworks, and these have been incorporated into the interview quotes where appropriate.</p>
<p>Another issue to consider is the "cross-border" context or the culture and mechanisms of higher education associated with (or as a result of) language-speaking regions. As it now stands, many such evaluation frameworks are originated from English/European-language speaking regions and appear to have been blindly applied to "other" language communities without due consideration of the industrial and education sectors of the "applied" region.</p>	<p>Thank you for this comment. The following discussion is added to the higher education institutional dimension: <i>The higher educational institution dimension offers valuable insights into the unique manifestations of cross-border contexts in action. In other contexts, higher education standards appear to be directly transplanted elsewhere, especially from Global North to South orientations (Tight, 2022). Yet, the three Taiwanese institutions in this research approach external referencing instead at arm's length, valuing internal, industry, and alumni inputs as tools for quality enhancement. There is not yet a requirement at the national level for institutions to seek external referencing partners elsewhere, even though the world rankings of several Taiwanese institutions have dropped off in recent years (A. Y. C. Hou et al., 2022).</i></p>
<p>I feel the discussion should be developed in the broader context of industry and employments, higher education and education policy, as well as diversities of HT education providers.</p>	<p>As suggested, further discussions are added to the manuscript.</p>